

IN THE SPECIFICATION (as originally filed):

On page 1, after line 2 please insert the following:

BACKGROUND OF THE DISCLOSURE

This is the U.S. national phase of International Application No. PCT/DE03/02700 filed August 7, 2003, the entire disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

The heading on page 1, line 3 has been changed as follows:

~~Description:~~ Field of the Disclosure

The paragraphs beginning on page 1, line 4 have been changed as follows:

The ~~invention disclosure~~ relates to a method for operating a vending machine, whereby goods can be placed into storage compartments and can be subsequently removed from the storage compartments by customers.

The ~~invention disclosure~~ also relates to a vending system.

On page 1, after line 7 please insert a heading as follows:

Related Technology

The paragraphs beginning on page 1, line 10 have been changed as follows:

Through prior public use, vending machines are known that ~~comprise~~ include a plurality of compartments which contain a number of goods. ~~The~~ Generally, the vending machines also ~~comprise~~ include a coin slot mechanism. If a user deposits an amount of money, he can select individual goods dispensing compartments until the monetary amount has been used up, so that the goods associated with the goods dispensing compartments can be dispensed.

Furthermore, individualized vending machines are known with which various vendors have access to a locker system and a computing unit linked to it. This is where individual conditions for the withdrawal of goods are stipulated.

German Preliminary Published Application No. DE 199 39 744 A1 describes, for example, a goods storage and dispensing means for private households and businesses as well as a method for this purpose. Here, in a dispensing means, for example, existing storage closets, shelves, refrigerators, freezers, ovens, microwaves and/or temperature-controlled cabinets are used to receive goods that have been placed into the dispensing means and stored there in accordance with the appropriate requirements. The introduced goods are preferably placed into the desired final storage place, so that the recipient does not have to carry out a transfer from an intermediate storage site to a final storage site.

European patent application EP 0 535 707 A2 also describes a vending system with a predefinable number of compartments which, in addition to reserving compartments for the goods that have been ordered by a customer, entails a filling of the remaining compartments with goods. The supplier enters selling information such as prices, descriptions or images into the vending system and the information is transmitted to a customer, for example, by phone or BTX terminal. In this context, the information is adapted when the goods being offered change.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The ~~invention~~ disclosure is based on the objective of finding a method that combines the advantages of the known methods.

In particular, ~~it is the objective of the invention to create a method~~ is disclosed for the automated selling of goods which makes it possible to offer articles while achieving the greatest possible flexibility and, at the same time, the greatest possible capacity utilization of the dispensing compartments.

~~According to the invention, this objective is achieved in that~~ Accordingly, the disclosure provides a method of the type described above is carried out in such a way that offer-related data is recorded in a central data processing unit, whereby matching offers are associated with identical offer identification codes, ~~that the offer identification codes are transmitted to a plurality of electronic vending machines, that storage compartments which are provided for the distribution of goods are stocked with goods, and that offer identification codes associated with the goods are recorded.~~

The offer-related data preferably ~~comprises~~ includes at least one piece of information about the identification of a type of goods and/or amount of goods ~~as well as~~ and preferably ~~also~~ the price to be paid for the goods. The term "offer-related data" is by no means to be construed in a restricting manner. In particular, other information such as the quality and the features of the goods can be the subject matter of the offer-related data.

The offer identification codes are preferably recorded when the storage compartments of the vending machines are stocked with goods. This particularly preferred embodiment ~~of the invention comprises especially~~ includes the following cases:

The paragraph beginning on page 3, line 7 has been changed as follows:

The ~~invention~~ disclosed method entails numerous advantages. In particular, ~~the invention makes it~~ is possible to operate the vending machine under flexible operating conditions. For example, it is possible on short notice to enter and change selling times, prices and offer contents in the vending machine or in a – preferably central – database that can be connected to the vending machine. Moreover, it is possible to set up specific offers for specific customers or customer groups.

The paragraphs beginning on page 3, line 21 have been changed as follows:

~~Another~~ In another especially advantageous embodiment, ~~of the invention is characterized in that~~ data for controlling the vending machine is are stored in the central data processing unit, this data is converted into control commands for controlling the vending machine, and the control commands are transmitted to the vending machine.

Moreover, it is advantageous ~~to refine the invention in such a way that~~ if the control commands change operating parameters of the vending machine.

~~Another~~ In another especially advantageous embodiment, ~~of the invention is characterized in that~~ the control commands interact with an electronic control unit located in the area of the vending machine in such a manner that the selection of the available operating functions can be changed.

Furthermore, it is advantageous ~~to refine the invention in such a way that~~ if the control commands are transmitted according to an XML protocol.

~~Another~~ In another especially advantageous embodiment, ~~of the invention is characterized in that~~ the vending machine sends a request for the transmission of control commands to the central data processing unit.

Moreover, it is advantageous ~~to refine the invention in such a way that~~ if the request for the transmission of control commands is repeated when an event occurs.

~~Another~~ In another especially advantageous embodiment, ~~of the invention is characterized in that~~ the request is repeated after a predefinable time interval.

Moreover, it is advantageous ~~to refine the invention in such a way that, in~~ if the area of the central data processing unit, a procedure checks whether changes have been made in the offer-related data stored in the central data processing unit and/or control data, and that, in case of changes in the offer-related data stored in the central data processing unit and/or control data, a control command is transmitted to the vending machine.

~~An~~ In another especially advantageous embodiment, ~~of the invention is characterized in that,~~ in the central data processing unit and/or in the vending machine, information about different user groups of the vending machine and information about the selection of individual offers are stored as a function of the appertaining user groups.

~~An~~ In another especially preferred embodiment, ~~of the invention is characterized in that~~ mailpieces are transported to the vending machines, placed into at least some of the storage compartments and stored there for later pick-up.

The paragraph beginning on page 5, line 11 have been changed as follows:

Another subject ~~matter~~ of the ~~invention~~ disclosure is a vending system comprising a plurality of vending machines ~~which is characterized in that~~ wherein the vending system ~~comprises~~ includes a central data processing unit in which information is stored about the goods present in the vending machines.

Moreover, it is advantageous ~~to refine the invention in such a way that~~ if the data processing unit is equipped with an interface that allows external access to at least some of the information about the goods that is stored in the data processing unit.

~~Another~~ In another especially advantageous embodiment, ~~of the invention is characterized in that~~ the external access to some of the information about the goods that is stored in the data processing unit is effectuated via the Internet.

The ~~invention~~ disclosure also ~~comprises~~ provides a vending machine with storage compartments for storing goods. This ~~vending machine is characterized in that~~ the vending machine and/or a central data processing unit connected to it ~~comprises~~ includes means for a flexible allocation of the storage compartments for a vending system and/or for a logistic system for sending and/or picking up goods.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Further advantages, special features and advantageous embodiments of the ~~invention~~ disclosure ensue from the ~~subordinate~~ appended claims and from the following ~~presentation~~ description of preferred embodiments, making reference to the drawings.

On page 6, after line 12 please insert a heading as follows:

DETAILED DESCRIPTION FO THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The paragraphs beginning on page 6, line 13 have been changed as follows:

The ~~invention is~~ disclosed method, system, and vending machine are especially well-suited for selling standardizable mass-produced goods that are sold preferably in large numbers by one or – which is especially preferred – several vending machines.

~~An~~ In an especially preferred embodiment, ~~of the invention is characterized in that the~~ vending machine is additionally operated as an electronic parcel compartment system and is thus used for delivering and/or picking up mailpieces.

The ~~invention~~ system allows the automated sale of goods, whereby the selection of the available goods can be changed on short notice and whereby selling and offer-related conditions are controlled centrally and/or can be changed as a function of external conditions.

The paragraph beginning on page 7, line 9 have been changed as follows:

The ~~invention~~ system makes it possible – also while otherwise not changing the operation of the vending machines – to sell individual goods and groups of goods only at certain times.

Moreover, ~~through the invention,~~ it is possible to sell goods at different times under different conditions. For example, individual products can be sold at variable prices, for

example, as a time-limited special offer, or as a sale, for example, in the case of end-of-season sales.

The paragraph beginning on page 7, line 21 has been changed as follows:

The ~~invention~~ system entails the special advantage that it allows an anonymous (mass) sale of goods as well as a targeted selling of goods to individual customer groups.

The paragraph beginning on page 8, line 7 has been changed as follows:

Moreover, the ~~invention~~ system allows goods to be reserved for individual customers, so that the vending machine allows a reliable execution of purchase orders.

The paragraph beginning on page 9, line 15 has been changed as follows:

The modality of filling the vending machine before there are any customer requests will be referred to as "PreFilling" below.

The paragraph beginning on page 10, line 16 has been changed as follows:

An especially preferred embodiment ~~of the invention~~, particularly of the vending system ~~according to the invention~~, is characterized in that information about the goods available in the vending machine and/or about the data of the vending machine can be accessed externally, for example, via the Internet.

The paragraph beginning on page 11, line 10 has been changed as follows:

- The vending machine and/or the central data processing unit that controls it can optionally produce, issue and administer order numbers and ~~TAN~~'s TANs (transaction numbers) (both or either one)

The paragraphs beginning on page 11, lines 14 have been changed as follows:

The ~~invention~~ method preferably entails a flexible stocking of the vending machines. The goods can be placed into the vending machine ahead of time, especially in the case of date-sensitive editions. The Screen Update, on which the product can be selected via a link, is then activated exactly at midnight.

During the stocking of the vending machine, the 'stocker' selects the menu item 'set offer['] . ' If there are several products per shipper, it has to be possible to unambiguously associate the content with the shipment.

The paragraph beginning on page 12, line 14 has been changed as follows:

The vending system shown in Figure 1 preferably ~~comprises~~ includes four participants. These include a vendor who can address goods to the vending machine. Preferably, an offer identification code is indicated here. The term "vendor" is by no means to be construed as a restriction. In particular, it also encompasses an electronic trading system that, in an especially preferred embodiment, can be fully automated. Moreover, it is possible to use software agents. Software agents, which are also referred to as intelligent agents, are preferably made up of software units that monitor their environment and act automatically. In an especially preferred embodiment, the software agent is configured in such a way that it can respond flexibly to requests of customers and to the presence of goods production and/or goods delivery possibilities as well as preferably also to other parameters.

The paragraph beginning on page 13, line 15 has been changed as follows:

Preferably, these process steps ~~comprise~~ include at least a few of the following process steps, especially a combination of the process steps shown here, whereby adherence

to the sequence is not necessary, but is preferred in order to enhance the efficiency of the method.

The paragraphs beginning on page 13, line 21 have been changed as follows:

- Once 'place shipment' has been chosen, the following selection appears: 'place parcels', 'place offers['] '.
- The deliverer chooses 'place offers[']; ' then he is prompted to enter the offer number.

The paragraph beginning on page 14, line 12 has been changed as follows:

The ~~invention~~ method entails various realization possibilities for a goods preview and/or a reservation of the goods. The special sale products in question are advertised ahead of time – for example, on the homepage or in cooperation with shippers. The possibility of providing a vending machine-related special sale product preview should likewise exist on the homepage.

The paragraph beginning on page 15, line 15 has been changed as follows:

In particular, the embodiment whose block diagram is shown in Figure 2 is suitable for selecting goods in the area of the vending machine. Preferably, for this purpose, the vending machine is equipped with a graphic display ~~means~~ for displaying at least some of the goods being offered. An especially suitable display ~~means~~ is a touch screen since it concurrently allows the offered goods to be selected in a simple manner.

The paragraph beginning n page 16, line 1 has been changed as follows:

Preferably, with this embodiment of the ~~invention~~ method, at least a few, preferably several, of the following process steps are used:

The paragraph beginning on page 18, line 1 has been changed as follows:

The embodiments of the ~~invention~~ method, system, and vending machine shown are merely to be understood by way of example. In particular, it is possible and advantageous to integrate additional functions into the vending machine. This additional information allows the integration of additional information into the vending machine such as, for example, the selection possibilities described for using the vending machine for reserved as well as for unreserved goods, as well as the combination of the use of an electronic parcel compartment system with storage compartments as a vending machine and also as an electronic parcel compartment system. Especially preferred embodiments ~~of the invention~~ entail the most flexible possible division of the electronically controlled compartment system into an anonymous vending machine, a vending machine operated in a reservation mode, a vending machine for pre-ordered goods and an electronic parcel compartment system for dispensing and/or accepting mailpieces, especially postal parcels.